



The KGB's Old Headquarters Lives On

The Lubyanka continues to glower over Russia.

By [Doug Bandow](#)

December 11, 2014

Red Square is one of the world's most iconic locales. Dominated by the Kremlin, St. Basil's Cathedral, and GUM Department Store, the space looks little different from Soviet times. While Lenin's mausoleum remains, any hint of menace is gone. Indeed, even during the worst of the USSR the square was more symbolic than threatening. For the most part no one went to the Kremlin to die.

Very different, however, is Lubyanka, just a short walk up Teatralny Proezd past the Bentley and Maserati dealerships.

In the late nineteenth century 15 insurance companies congregated on Great Lubyanka Street, prospering as the great czarist despotism entered the industrial age. The Rossia agency, one of Russia's largest, completed an office building in 1900. Excess space was turned into apartments and leased out to retailers selling everything from books to beds.

The building was profitable, but 14 years later in his worst single decision the foolish czar led his country into the abyss of World War I. In 1917 he was ousted by a moderate revolution, which in turn was overthrown by the Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov Lenin. They nationalized insurance companies along with much of the rest of the economy, and switched Russia's capital from Petrograd to Moscow. As a result, the Rossia building at No. 2 Great Lubyanka Street became the new regime's property. And the new secret police, known as the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage, or Cheka, evicted the rest of the tenants and settled in.

The building was renovated and merged with a new structure behind the original one. The most important "improvements" were made inside, however, such as increasing prison space. With further reconstruction and expansion the building took its present form. The KGB added two more buildings over the years. After all, the secret police had much to do: a dictatorship's work is never done.

The first Cheka head was Felix Dzerzhinsky, a Russian Pole born in 1877. He conducted the infamous "Red Terror," what he called a "fight to the finish" against the Bolsheviks' political opponents. As part of that campaign he personally approved the torture and murder of thousands. He wrote: "Kill without investigation, so that they will be afraid." And the agency did so. Of course, not every prisoner was murdered, so the first concentration camps were established in 1918. In a testament to Dzerzhinsky's effectiveness, the Nazis modeled their repressive security apparatus, most notably the Gestapo, after the Cheka.

After his death in 1926 Dzerzhinsky was buried between the Kremlin and Lenin's mausoleum. Grand Lubyanka Street was renamed Dzerzhinsky Street. Observed J. Michael Waller: "So total was the KGB's devotion to Dzerzhinsky that his iconography proliferated in the form of official sculptures, anniversaries, quotations, and poetry—even the annual celebration of the Cheka chief's birthday, September 11." A grand statue of Dzerzhinsky, weighing 15 tons, was erected in a circle in front of the Cheka headquarters. After all, the party owed its rule to repression, exemplified by the secret police. Even as other buildings were constructed to handle the burgeoning repression the director, including such brutal notables as Lavrenty Beria under Joseph Stalin and Yuri Andropov under Leonid Brezhnev, stayed in Lubyanka, occupying an office on the third floor overlooking the square and later Dzerzhinsky's statue.

The agency's name changed over the years. The Cheka became the GPU, OGPU, NKVD and later the KGB. After the latter was dissolved the building went to the Border Guard Service, later absorbed by the Federal Security Service (FSB), responsible for foreign intelligence. Today Lubyanka looks non-threatening, a yellowish color and architectural style less severe than the harshly grandiose Stalinist architecture seen throughout the city.

The KGB faced its greatest challenge in the Gorbachev era. Contra common expectations, the security services did not oppose reform—of a particular sort. Explained one-time deputy KGB head Filipp Bobkov, "Gorbachev's policy met with understanding and support." Glasnost and perestroika, officials hoped, would strengthen the USSR. Security personnel tended to be among Russia's most knowledgeable people, worldly and practical. As such, they understood that the Soviet Union was well behind the West and only radical action could save the Soviet state. That, not creating a liberal society, was their objective.

The KGB understood that it had an image problem and began a PR campaign presenting the agency as a patriotic organization dedicated to serving the Soviet people. The secret police created a museum celebrating their efforts and offering guided tours of Lubyanka. The KGB even reached out to foreign reporters and established a Center of Public Relations. After being feted at Lubyanka, Jeff Trimble of *U.S. News & World Report* wrote of "an impression jarringly at odds with the building's usual image as a warren of torture cells and basement killing chambers."

However, even the most charming briefers and articulate press releases—as well as the (I am not making this up) crowning of a Miss KGB in 1990—could not hide the agency's ugly history. As new media sources were created in the USSR demands for reform raced beyond Gorbachev's and the KGB's control. Even some former KGB officers detailed killings and other abusive practices. Noted Trimble: "Media reports detailed KGB abuse of psychiatry and the penal system, its brutal violations of religious and other human rights, and of course Stalin's crimes, including mass killings by the NKVD. These attacks went far beyond the tame criticisms that had appeared in 1986 and 1987 under Gorbachev's lap dog version of glasnost." In 1990 the Solovetsky Stone, brought from the Solovetsky Islands, the site of the first camp for political prisoners, was dedicated near Lubyanka to commemorate victims of the camps. (A second stone monument was erected in St. Petersburg in 2002.)

The KGB's patience finally gave out as the Soviet Union faced dissolution rather than revival. In August 1991, KGB head Vladimir Kryuchkov helped plan the coup against Gorbachev. By past standards his side, which contained representatives of the party, army, and secret police, should have won. But the public, led by Boris Yeltsin, former Politburo member and elected president of the Russian republic, defeated the plotters. After the coup's collapse a crowd gathered in front of Lubyanka. Demonstrators painted a swastika on the commemorative Andropov plaque on the building and attempted to pull down the Dzerzhinsky monument. City officials brought in a crane to finish the job. The statue now rests in Moscow's Fallen Monument Park, a graveyard for big Communist tchotchke.

Kryuchkov and several other KGB officials were imprisoned for their role in the coup. Many top officials were fired and Gorbachev appointed a reformer to run the agency. Like the Soviet Union, the agency was essentially friendless, leaderless, and defenseless. Journalist Yevgenia Albats wrote: "If either Gorbachev or Yeltsin had been bold enough to dismantle the KGB during the autumn of 1991, he would have met little resistance."

However, these two reformers—most importantly Yeltsin, who effectively took over when the Soviet Union's dissolution left Gorbachev without a job—botched their opportunity when they attempted to fix rather than eliminate the agency. Only the Fifth Chief Directorate, the political police, was abolished, and many of its employees were reassigned to investigate tax evaders. The first post-coup chairman, Vadim Bakatin, later acknowledged that his attempt to reorient career "Chekists" away from their philosophy and work was naïve. Investigative journalist and lawmaker Yuri Shchekochikhin reported that "the skeleton of the old secret services has remained inviolable." Even Yeltsin acknowledged that reorganization attempts had been "superficial and cosmetic."

Still, diehard communists did not take the KGB's cosmetic demise well. Alexei Kondaurov, one of the KGB's most senior officials left inside Lubyanka after the failure of the coup, watched the attack on Dzerzhinsky's statue and, he related later, felt betrayed, thinking: "I will prove to you that your victory will be short-lived." Among the half million KGB operatives who likely felt the same way was Vladimir Putin, who had resigned only the day before.

In 2000 Nikolai Kharitonov, a Communist-aligned member of the Duma, complained that without the statute "Lubyanka Square is defenseless and the agents of the KGB and FSB are defenseless." Multiple proposals to replace the statue were rebuffed by Moscow's Monument Art Commission lest doing so create "unnecessary tension." But five years later, without fanfare, a bronze bust of Dzerzhinsky was returned to the courtyard of the Moscow police headquarters. An officer was quoted as being surprised, but "as you know, the decisions of the bosses are not discussed." A plaster statue of Dzerzhinsky was erected in front of Lubyanka earlier this year as part of the commemoration of the 137th anniversary of his birth.

These were mere symbols, however. Kondaurov more practical hopes also were soon vindicated. The KGB effectively ended up taking over Russia. In contrast to countries such as Poland and Czechoslovakia, which barred from office the most culpable communists, the new Russia welcomed them. Wrote Waller, "the government of Boris Yeltsin preserved Chekist structures and co-opted them, relying on them instead of a political party as a core component of Yeltsin's

personal political machine, an anchor for the new oligarchy of rulers.” He named Chekists, or members of the “siloviki” (or power agents), to important government positions, most importantly Vladimir Putin, who headed the FSB and then became prime minister—and Yeltsin’s successor as president when the latter resigned.

In 1999 Vladimir Putin became prime minister under President Boris Yeltsin. The former then visited Lubyanka, on December 20, the anniversary of the founding of the Cheka. He unveiled a plaque for Yuri Andropov, KGB head from 1967 to 1982, under whom Putin served. As president Putin later had a plaque added to the apartment building where Andropov had lived in Moscow and a statue erected in St. Petersburg. Putin has hinted that Dzerzhinsky’s big statue might stage a comeback, though so far nothing more has happened. Communist Party Duma member Vladimir Rodin argued: “Today, when war is at the borders of our state, it is not a bad thing to remember [Dzerzhinsky].”

But statues matter far less than philosophies. In December 1999 then-Prime Minister Putin said: “Bodies of state security have always defended the national interests of Russia. They must not be separated from the state and turned into some kind of monster.” Yeltsin—perhaps under the influence at the time—declared “we nearly overdid it when we exposed the crimes committed by the security services, for there were not only dark periods, but also glorious episodes in their history, of which one may really be proud.”

Anne Applebaum, *Washington Post* columnist, argued that “Putin—and, more importantly, most of the people around him—is deeply steeped in the culture of Andropov’s KGB.” In her view they are modernizers but authoritarians, who “believe that the rulers of the state must exert careful control over the life of the nation.” Putin has said that “There is no such thing as a former Chekist.”

Shortly before becoming president Putin—perhaps joking, perhaps not—told his former agency colleagues: “A group of FSB operatives, dispatched under cover to work in the government of the Russian Federation, is successfully fulfilling its task.” After taking over Putin turned to his KGB network to run both the government and the economy. Chekists made up nearly half of his initial senior appointments; one of Putin’s closest allies, Viktor Cherkessov, had served in the Fifth Chief Directorate hunting down political dissidents. Today one-fourth of senior bureaucrats are members of the security forces; three-fourths of senior bureaucrats have some affiliation with the latter. The result, wrote UCLA’s Daniel Treisman, is a “silovarchy” in which “silovarchs” replaced the economic oligarchs who had emerged during the flawed transition from communism to capitalism under Boris Yeltsin.

Of course, Putin is not the first politician to concentrate power, rig elections, manage politics, suppress dissent, and intimidate opponents. Nor to turn to the security and military services to run the economy. Treisman argued that similar systems developed in South Korea, Indonesia, and Nigeria when ruled by generals. The result typically was a different sort of corruption and statism. Writing of the Chekists after the Soviet collapse, Waller explained: “The unchecked apparatus and the economic openings of the late 1980s and 1990s only increased the possibilities of the security organs serving as agents of corruption and organized crime.” In practice, Putin and his system are not just defending kleptocracy; they have merged with kleptocracy. Overall,

explained the *Economist*: “Men from the FSB and its sister organizations control the Kremlin, the government, the media and large parts of the economy—as well as the military and security forces.”

Although the economic consequences of this system vary, the political impact uniformly is bad, reinforcing the worst temptations of power. Explained Treisman: “the temptation to use secret service tools and techniques predisposes such regimes toward authoritarian politics.” That certainly describes Putin today. Nevertheless, he retains the appearance of democratic politics and capitalist economics to improve his regime’s image.

This system offers a tragic detour for people who desperately need liberty. But despite the frenzied push in Washington for economic sanctions and military threats, the success of Putinism is well beyond America’s control. Even Applebaum admitted that there isn’t much outsiders can do to influence events within Russia. Washington should avoid pursuing policies that might offer emotional satisfaction but would provoke an even harsher nationalist response. Moreover, the U.S. should not promote military confrontation with nuclear-armed Moscow over an issue of much greater importance to Europe.

In fact, Putinism may face its strongest challenge on the economic front from declining energy prices, Western sanctions, and domestic distortions. The silovarchy still will work to enrich itself, but will not have sufficient resources to aid the broader Russian population that constitutes Putin’s political base. Prior to his seizure of Crimea Putin suffered through a popularity decline and sizable protests against his reelection. His poll ratings have since risen, but as the nationalistic fervor surrounding Crimea fades, the Russian people’s desire for prosperity may overcome the desire for order.

Finally, the system faces a natural limit: The siloviki will naturally die off. Noted Applebaum, “Sooner or later, the generation trained in the mindset of Andropov’s KGB will retire.” It’s hard to predict what will follow, but a new direction is likely. Putin has been able to manage the news, but not deny his citizens all access to information. The younger generation is more likely to demand a changing of the political guard, emphasize economic opportunity, and look to the West. That would benefit the Russian people and the rest of us.

When change comes, it will be critical for Russia’s new leaders to eliminate the Chekist mindset. In contrast, Lubyanka should be preserved, perhaps as museum about tyranny. We all know George Santayana’s famous saying that those who forget history are doomed to repeat it. No one should want to repeat the KGB experience.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties. He worked as special assistant to President Reagan.